



The Impact of Youth Work in Europe: A Study of Five European Countries

Edited by Jon Ord with Marc Carletti, Susan Cooper, Christophe Dansac, Daniele Morciano, Lasse Siurala and Marti Taru



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***Dedicated to
all the young people
who shared their stories***

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Chapter 11:

The Impact of Youth Work in Italy: 'Self-determination', 'Community connectedness' and 'Improvement in job chances'.

By Daniele Morciano and Fausta Scardigno¹

Introduction

This project involved three youth centres in the south of Italy, in the region of Puglia. They are characterised by a vision of young people as drivers of innovation and change in society (Skott-Myhre, 2005). The focus of their activity is the promotion of young people's ideas, projects and capabilities, rather than prioritising their problems. The principle of working '*with and for*' young people promoted by the European Union is at the core of the mission and approach of these youth centres. The project, therefore, has been carried out from a sociological perspective that sees the young as one of the most significant forces of change available to society (Mannheim, 1944: 41).

There are some difficulties in considering the professional workers that participated in this project as *youth workers* due the limited currency of this term within public or policy discourse. In Italy there is no public recognition or regulation of the specific professional role of a youth worker. However, in addition to various volunteers working in the youth sector, there are a number of professions working in the sphere of non-formal/out-of-school education which are recognised by the state, such as professional educator, socio-cultural educator, community worker and social worker. The professionals involved in this project included community psychologists, sociologists, community workers and art-based educators.

Transformative Evaluation (TE) was applied to these three separate organisations working in the youth sector over a period of a year. See Table 11.1 (overleaf) for a summary of the organisational context of the three organisations.

Organisation A is an arts-based youth centre utilising cinema as an educational medium. The youth centre is located in a suburb on the outskirts of the city and has a high rate of crime. The centre runs courses in film production and has a drop-in area. A range of professionals is associated with the centre including film experts, social educators and a psychologist.

Organisation B has become an incubator of new youth-led and community-based projects – for example, community self-build projects as well as a nursery and a café. It provides a platform to develop and initiate self-directed projects from social volunteering to creative expression.

Organisation C has a community-based and project development approach similar to Organisation B. Initially this focused on art and cultural projects (such as live music and dance shows), but more recently their focus has been focused on enterprise involving product design and the use of 3D printers, as well as fashion and photography.

¹ This research project was a joint effort by both the authors. In this chapter, the *Introduction*, *Improvement in job chances*, *Sense of belonging to the local community* and *Conclusions* sections are the work of Fausta Scardigno, while the rest of the chapter is by Daniele Morciano.

	Organisation A	Organisation B	Organisation C
Sector	Voluntary/Charitable Sector	Statutory Sector	Statutory Sector
Age range	17–34	17–35	14–35
Location	(Sub)urban	Rural and urban	Urban
Funding sources	Mainly public commissioning, also Local Authority (annual grant)	Mainly public commissioning, also income from paid services	Mainly public commissioning
Type of work	Open access (centre-based and detached), training programme (school of cinema), community development	Open access (centre-based), community development, hub of youth and/or adult enterprise projects (profit and no profit)	Open access (centre-based), community development, hub of youth and/or adult enterprise projects (profit and no profit)
Participating youth workers	3	3	3
Participating stakeholders	3 stakeholders including a councillor for youth policy (LA), a councillor for tourism (LA) and an external trainer	3 stakeholders including local entrepreneurs and a councillor for youth policy (LA)	3 stakeholders including representatives of local charities

Table 11.1 The three youth work settings in Italy

Three cycles of Transformative Evaluation were implemented in each of the three organisations and in total 151 Significant Change stories were collected from 151 different young people who attended the three youth centres. Among these stories, 45 Contextualised Significant Change (CSC) stories and 9 Most Significant Change (MSC) stories were selected.

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total
Org. A	15	19	17	51
Org. B	13	14	19	46
Org. C	19	20	15	54
Total	47	53	51	151

Table 11.2 Generation of stories in Italy by organisation and cycle

The Contextualised Significant Change stories were chosen by the youth workers in cooperation with the manager of each youth centre. They were presented to the group of stakeholders who selected the Most Significant Change story for each cycle. Stakeholders included local council members, officers of the youth services and members of associations working

in partnership with the centre. The stakeholders met in the youth centres and shared their decision with the youth workers.

Story Type	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total
Significant Change stories (total number of stories collected)	47	53	51	151
Contextualised Significant Change stories (total number of stories selected by the youth workers and presented to the stakeholder group meetings)	15	15	15	45
Most Significant Change stories (number of stories selected by the stakeholder groups)	3	3	3	9

Table 11.3 Types of stories generated

Age

The majority of stories were collected from young people over the age of 19, representing 88% of the stories; 7% were from those aged 16 to 19; and 5% were from young people aged 13 to 15. The largest group was young adults aged between 25 and 35 years old, which accounts for 56% of the total number of stories. The next largest group was young people aged 20 to 24 years old, representing 32% of the stories. See Table 11.4 for a breakdown of ages across each of the organisations.

	10.	13-15	16-19	20-24	25-35	Total
Org. A	0	0	3	30	18	51
Org. B	0	0	3	13	30	46
Org. C	0	7	5	5	37	54
Total	0	7	11	48	85	151

Table 11.4 Story generation across age

This reflects the general age range of the young people attending youth centres who participated in the project. Furthermore, the extension of the age range up to 35 is usual in Italy where youth policies tend to involve an age range that starts from adolescence (15 to 19) up to young adulthood (25 to 34). There is no specific law defining the age range of youth, but specific youth policies tend to define the age range depending on the addressed needs.

Gender

There were more stories generated by males than females: 84 by young men, which represents 63% of the total number of stories, compared to 67 by females, representing 37%. This

represents the gender balance at the youth organisations, where young men tend to slightly outnumber young women.

	Male	Female	Totals
Org. A	26	25	51
Org. B	26	20	46
Org. C	32	22	54
Total	84	67	151

Table 11.5 Story generation across gender

Example of a Most Significant Change Story

Vincenzo's story¹ (27, male, collected from Organisation A cycle 1)

'I have been coming to the Academy³ since I was 14 years old. A youth worker at that time convinced me to have a look at the centre and see which activities were inside. When I decided to enrol on the cinema training programme, I was more motivated to attend the place and that was the beginning of my real journey here. I attended courses, I participated in the creation of short films (including one of my own), I entered the true spirit of the Academy. With the boys in the neighbourhood, we set up a rap music project and after a year the coordinator suggested I join the centre as a volunteer, especially to cooperate in projects with children. The Academy for me was a chance for growth: first of all as a person and then as an individual interested in art. This change process first of all helped me to face my shyness. As a boy I used to raise 'a barrier' when someone asked me something, no matter how small. I could not talk about myself, the drama of my family blocked me, but at the same time enabled me to find the resources, with the help of the people in the centre. I did not know it, I did not think I had any effective skill in communication, but I felt I needed to express myself in some way. I did not think of myself as having the resources or the potential that I have now realised since joining the centre. People in the community see me as a guy who, despite the difficult place he lives, has been able to express himself and get accepted by the neighbourhood. The Academy is a safe place to be yourself, here we all feel at home.'

The youth worker's commentary

'Vincenzo is a boy who has grown up in the neighbourhood since he was 6 years old. He has a troubled family history, he does not go into detail because there is pain in the story that I did not consider appropriate to investigate further; he currently lives with his mother and sister.

He took part in the theatrical workshops and has performed in several shows. He likes dance, music and stage art. He is a young man who has changed in many respects, especially in his temperament. He used to be very hostile and had a ruthless relationship

² All names are pseudonyms chosen by the young people

³ This is a 'Cinema Academy' run by Organisation A.

with others during his youth. Today he is a very sweet, sensitive and particularly sociable person, well known throughout the neighbourhood.'

Youth worker group's reason for selection of the story

'The story of Vincenzo is difficult to include in one specific category of outcome as it encapsulates a change that extends throughout his life for more than ten years. Vincenzo shared the story of his adolescence, by focusing on his internal and identity struggles with a whole neighbourhood where the Academy represents a second home, a second life school, a second family. Its change embraces his relational world, overcoming prejudices, stereotypes, and overlapping the concepts of value. Vincenzo developed a new identity thanks to experiences at the centre despite a life path that often involved suffering. However, today Vincenzo is a young boy perfectly integrated and aware of his own value.'

Stakeholder group's reason for selection as the Most Significant Change story

'The Stakeholder Group chose this story because it is the most emblematic of a change experience, taking into consideration the disadvantaged context where the young person grew up. It reflects his determination to emancipate himself, which is in no small part thanks to his participation in the activities in the youth centre.'

The impact of youth work in Italy: analysis of young people's stories

The stories were analysed by the authors using the agreed approach to content analysis or coding (Saldana, 2015) to identify the common themes in the stories. The young people's own words were central throughout the process. The preliminary analysis of the stories produced 33 initial codes. Further analysis collated these initial codes into 6 final codes, as detailed in Table 11.6 (overleaf).

The most common theme was 'improvement of job chances' which occurred in 57 out of the 151 stories, representing 38% of the total number of stories. This was closely followed by 'sense of community' which occurred in 55 stories, 38% of the total. Two other final codes, 'self-determination' and 'relating to others and valuing diversity', were also commonly occurring and were both contained in 48 stories, 32% of the total. The last two codes were a little less frequent; 'developing or discovering new skills' occurred in 32 stories, 21% of the total number, and 'participation in innovation and change' occurred in 30 stories, 20% of the total; see Figure 11.1 (overleaf).

Gender differences

There were some small differences when the codes were analysed by gender. Change related to sociability – 'relations with others', as well as 'self-determination' and 'employability' – were slightly more prominent in the stories from young women. The male stories tended to feature 'new skills', 'participation in innovation and change' and 'sense of community'. However, these differences were not marked and it is not the intention to draw any particular significance from them. They are illustrated in Figure 11.2 (overleaf).

Improvement in job chances	Sense of belonging to the community	Self-determination
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enterprise creation • A job in the youth centre • Career support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilising your capabilities in the community • Being aware of the positive resources in the community • Sense of belonging to the centre as a community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity to face changes • Autonomy from your own family • Self-fulfilment • Self esteem • Radical change in your own life course • Decision making skills • Motivation and determination • Social emancipation
Relating with others and valuing diversity	Developing or discovering new skills	Participation in innovation and change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming shyness and diffidence • Open mindedness • Understanding the value of cooperation • New emotional bond (friend, love etc.) • Overcoming social prejudice – able to build a relationship with people seen as ‘different’ • Feeling of ‘being respected’ – beyond prejudices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical skills • Ability to learn from experience • Mediation skills • Public speaking skills • Critical thinking • Discovering new traits of their own personality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation to contribute to a social or cultural change • Practising and developing innovation skills (i.e. creativity, curiosity, exploration, connection of ideas etc.) • Joining a social innovation project • Innovations in a professional sphere

Table 11.6 Final and initial codes

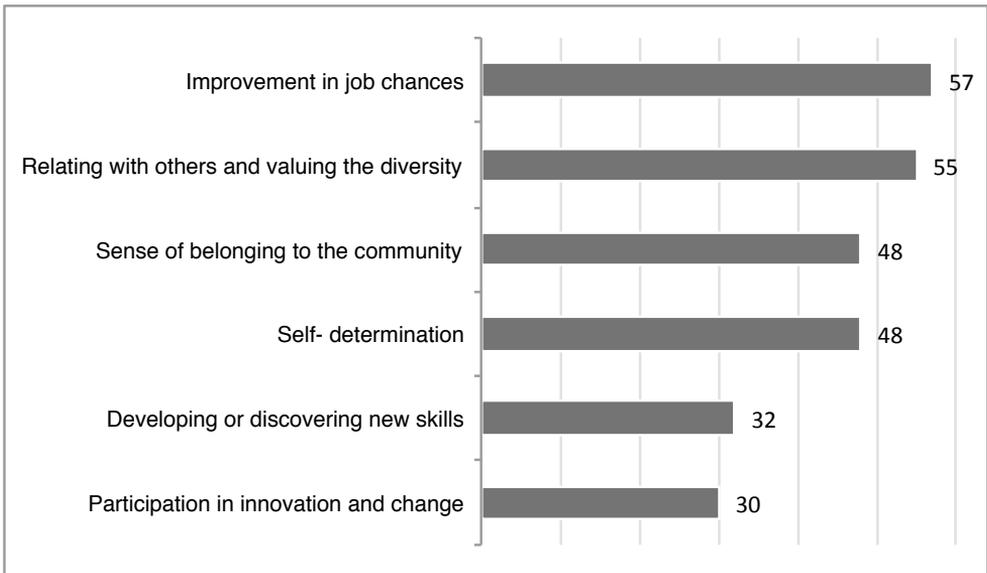


Figure 11.1 Number of stories per final code

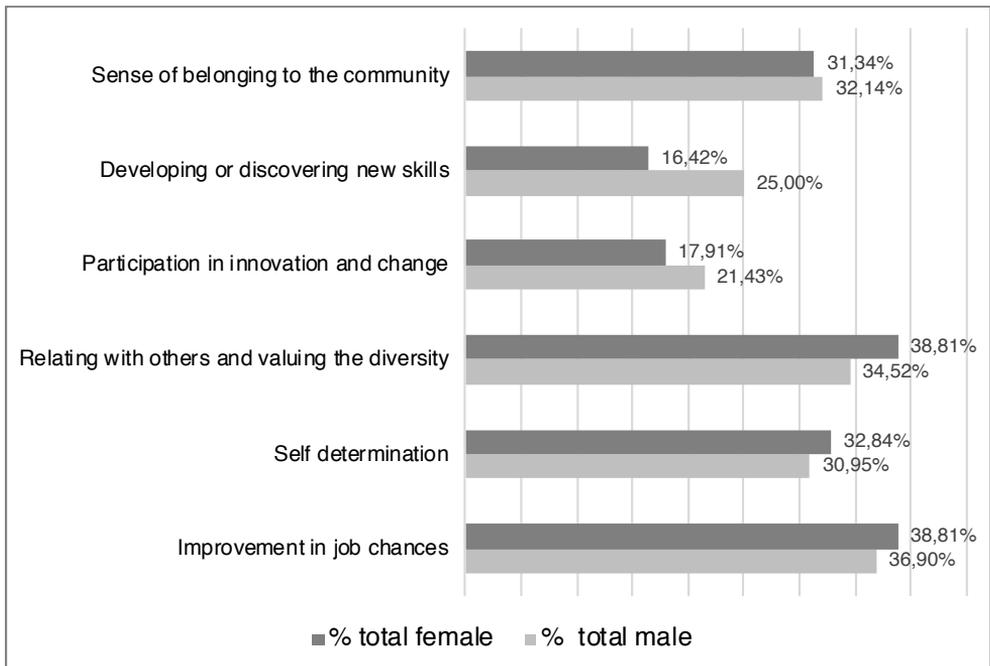


Figure 11.2 Gender breakdown of the stories

Discussion of final codes

Improvement in job chances

A positive effect on employment arose in 57 change stories, 38% of the total number of stories. For 28 young people this meant having had a job opportunity in an activity at the youth centre, for example as a technician, chef, working in the servery, secretary, trainer or educator. A group of 9 young people considered the youth centre as an important source of help for the creation of a new enterprise (for example, in the field of film production, green building,⁴ eco-design or artistic production).

A distinct contrast was evident in the young people's stories about their positive experiences in the youth centre versus their formal education or job backgrounds. For example, Antonio (male, 24) 'discovered' his vocation for photography even though he had no previous experience, saying: '*I've never imagined that photography could become my job*'. The story of Edi (female, 21) also illustrates how, unlike formal education, the youth centre had improved her professional competences in filmmaking where she had wanted to work for a long a time: '*I've learnt a lot of things that I didn't even know or had any experience of.*' Another young adult with some previous experiences in the cinema sector started to cooperate with the centre as a trainer:

'The change I feel resonates with my background and experience and gave me the opportunity to learn new methods in the centre, especially about how to use cinema as a medium for encouraging meetings between those who live in the area and the artists.'
(male, 34)

Even when the youth centre did not offer a direct job opportunity, youth work activities acted as a mediating mechanism (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) that helped young people to develop their own professional path. This was the case in a number of stories that focused on increasing both social bonds (Dahrendorf, 1981) and relational capital (Donati, 2006) as resources that open access to the labour market. For example, one story tells how the youth centre helped a young woman to gain '*access to a specific job network which would have been difficult to connect with*' (female, 24). Another story tells how joining the training courses at the centre was a chance to understand a job that a young person really liked, and to communicate this to his family:

'The centre gave me the chance to discover a new world and a possible career that I did not consider and that now I want to start.' (male, 18)

The opportunity to create connections with other people and to try to turn a hobby into a job was also important in this story:

'I had a small handicraft activity, no more than a hobby. However, thanks to the enterprise lab that I'm attending in the centre, now I feel less alone and the group is helping me to try to transform my hobby into a real job.' (female, 25)

⁴Green building (also known as green construction or sustainable building) is a term which refers to environmentally responsible construction.

Relating with others and valuing diversity

In over a third of the stories – 55 in total, representing 38% of the total – references were made to how the experiences of youth work in the youth organisations had helped to develop young people’s abilities to relate to people from different backgrounds. This was especially relevant for young people who were part of a minority group that was affected by social prejudice. An essential condition of this process appeared to be the creation of a ‘*non-judgemental space*’, where young people felt they were accepted. One story dramatically describes the tearing down of the ‘*wall between himself and the other*’ (male, 27). This was confirmed by the youth worker, who recalled that the young person ‘*used to react to every ordinary question by raising a wall to diminish his own self and the other person*’.

As a result of being helped to overcome the barrier between their own world and the social world around them, many of the young people had started to actively participate in the activities of the youth centres. They felt ‘*free to talk*’ (female, 21), to ‘*not be just a silent spectator*’ (male, 20). This means the young people are actively expressing themselves and in so doing they are improving their communication skills and their ability to be in dialogue with other people. They are less wary and more curious about their ‘*own diversity as well as the other young people’s*’ (24, female). Interacting with people from different backgrounds (in terms of age, geographical origin, culture, lifestyle, as well as ways of thinking etc.) became for one young person an opportunity to open her ‘*mind and view*’ (female, 35).

For many of the young people involvement in the youth work projects provided opportunities to open up to others and a chance to understand the value of diversity. For example, as one story explains:

‘I now really understand the meaning of learning how to see life differently, not just seeing things from your own point of view.’ (female, 24)

From the following story we can also explicitly see how young people become aware of developing a special relationship with a new and diverse peer group in the centre:

‘We were all very different in terms of age, interests, lifestyle, and ways of thinking. After the summer break, we realised we have become something more than simple individuals in the same training course.’ (female, 25)

This story also illustrates how it was the group experience that helped this person to understand ‘*what it means to cooperate and, at the same time, have respect for the space of others*’ (male 32). Another points out: ‘*every individual will have more value if situated in a collective project*’ (male, 24).

In some stories an awareness is present of the distinctly different culture between youth centres and schools, with the former founded on cooperation and the latter promoting competition. Young people acknowledged that at the youth centre it is possible to discover what it means ‘*not to leave anyone behind, helping each other, listening to who is by your side, [whereas] the school system pushes students to compete for the highest score*’, going on to argue that ‘*cooperation helps you to learn more than competition*’ (female, 22).

Sense of belonging to the local community

For a number of young people the youth centre in itself became a small community to which they feel they belong. In several stories the youth centre was described as a 'second home' or a 'great family', a place where young people could share their passions and their interests with other people. Being involved in the youth centre also provided the chance to discover the local community as a positive resource. For example: *'I had the chance to meet good people, enjoy good situations, in an atmosphere of buzz and novelty'* (female, 32).

Some young people discovered the vitality hidden under the sense of tragedy of a socially problematic suburb where the youth centre was located. They discovered:

'A world made of little things, of lively children and surprisingly curious, of women that are strong like rocks and that bring on their shoulder the weight of difficult family, but without leaving themselves to be overwhelmed by sadness.' (female, 25)

In a variety of ways the youth centres enabled experiences which nurtured a sense of belonging to the local community. For example, in one case the opportunity to start a project in the centre that was connected with the wider community actually became more important than looking for a job opportunity elsewhere. It appears that, certainly for some of the people, the greater their sense of feeling that they are a part of a community, involved in positive collective change (which transcends the own individual issues), the less they feel the need to escape their immediate surroundings. Being involved in a community project also seemed to reduce the imperative for personal self-fulfilment by placing more value on the building of a social self:

'I feel part of a social change that we are carrying out with [org B]. I feel I am part of this process, otherwise I would have gone away.' (male, 24)

The sense of community also appears to empower people to overcome barriers and to develop new relationships with other local actors. Young people are therefore encouraged to look outside the youth centre and to implement outreach projects throughout the surrounding area:

'For me, the next step is developing meaningful relationships with other elements of the community, so to go outside the youth centre and live outside in the public space. In this way, we can share with the community the activities and the life of the youth centre.' (male, 35)

The following story is also interesting as it acknowledges the importance of connecting different parts of the community. It illustrates how the initiative was taken to challenge the prejudice of the young person's own faith-based community by encouraging cooperation between his Christian group and the youth centre through a specific project. This affirmed to him that: *'it is not true that the life of young Christian is a churchy life, limited to the parish or the church. I feel that also Christian youth can make a contribution to community development thanks to this project'* (male, 27).

Self-determination

The final code of self-determination covers a number of related aspects of social or self-emancipation identified in the initial codes, which included the ‘capacity to face changes’, ‘self-fulfilment’, ‘decision making skills’ and ‘motivation and determination’. In all, 48 of the young people’s stories alluded to this theme. For example:

‘I feel I have reached a deep awareness about myself and of my desires, now and for the future. In this centre I felt that my intuition about my real job interest was right.’
(female, 22)

‘For the first time in life I have a sense being in the right place to do the right things.’
(male, 26)

Evidently the youth centre support is perhaps best described as a *subjectivation* process, namely the ability to take possession of one’s own thoughts, desires, and identity, while using one’s knowledge and skills to free oneself from the need to be accepted by others at all costs (Cahn, 1998; Wainrib 2012). According to Dubet (2007), subjectivation is related to the ability to become the creator of one’s own social experience, actively affecting one’s own life course.

For example, the training course on arts run at one of the centres provided the opportunity to use art as a medium for self-exploration and self-understanding, as well as understanding others. Art at the youth centre became a means of expressing a range of ideas, insights, emotions, feelings, desires and life styles. In the words of one young person, art becomes ‘*a medium of the soul*’, as he goes on to explain:

‘We all look for a medium for our own soul, a means to express ourselves. Probably, I completed what I wanted to express with the audio-visual. But the important thing is to continue to look for new mediums that can help us to express new aspects of ourselves, theatre, music, engineering, architecture, information technology... if we love what we do and we can communicate something of ourselves with the job that we do, we have found the right medium for us in that moment.’ (male, 24)

Some stories highlight how young people have been assisted in rising to the challenge of a disadvantaged family background (Besozzi, 2006), and have been able to achieve a sense of social and self-emancipation in overcoming both personal and social barriers. For example, one story tells of the transformation of a boy wrapped up in a defence of his feminine traits against social prejudice (traits which he defines as his *alter ego* and which he expresses in his artistic performances). However, thanks to the relationship and conversations with the youth workers, he eventually became an educator in the youth centre:

‘People in the community see me as a guy who, despite the difficult place he lives, has been able to express himself and get accepted by the neighbourhood.’ (male, 27)

The inclusive nature of the centres provides an important foundation for their success. For example, one story describes how a young man was given a second chance following a probation order due to a drug offence. The centre provided ‘*a chance for rehabilitation*’ (male, 21). Another example includes a group of disabled young people who had the opportunity

to undertake work experience in the social restaurant. As one of them explains, despite *'no experience in cooking ... it seemed to me crazy and, at the same time, beautiful when I found myself doing the job of the assistant cook'* (female, 27).

Developing new skills

In 32 stories (22%) the discovering of new skills, aptitudes or capabilities was evident in the learning experiences of the young people. These often appear to be associated with learning that is associated with a real life situations, or what may be termed situated or experiential learning (Dewey, 1938). For example, one young person got *'a feel for a task that I never thought I'd be able to do before'* (female, 22). Other examples included discovering relational skills that will be useful for finding a job, such as learning to be more patient, planning and coordinating a project, or working in the restoring sector and learning an artisan profession. Work experience in the restaurant at one centre helped one young man to *'see aspects of myself that I did not think I had'* (male, 22). The following story exemplifies the opportunities afforded to young people to develop new skills:

'What you discover in this place is the things that you are able to do or the things that you didn't know you were able to do. In this space you discover hidden qualities, here you can see them and you can put them into practice, or you can understand that you are not right for a particular activity.' (female, 32)

The experience of 'doing things' can also lead to rediscovering *'abilities that you felt or thought you had ... you can see them [and] practice them'* (female, 32). Learning from experience for some became part of their way of life; that is, *'a way to face everything, not just the activities that I take part in at [Organisation B]'* (female, 25). It is an approach that pushes young people to overcome their own perfectionism and to value mistakes as a way of learning. In this sense, it is also an opportunity to deal with the natural egocentricity and idealisation of the self that often characterise adolescence. This is what one young person realised, recounting her experience of producing her first short film: *'how many mistakes I made and how useful each of them were to me'* (female, 26).

Participation in innovation and change

A total of 30 (20%) young people indicated in their stories that they felt a change process had taken place as a result of attending the youth centre. For many of those young people the youth centre had supported 'active reflexivity' (Archer, 2003) in turning a desire for social and cultural change into a feasible project (Morciano and Merico, 2017). Some of them took the role of community educator by involving children, young people or adults in projects run by the youth centre. For example, one young woman shared her experiences of running make-up workshops with a group of woman from the community; initially *'those women seemed so impenetrable. But they gave me respect as a woman but, also as a friend'* (female, 28). At the same centre a young man planned and implemented an educational project for children about cinema (male, 24).

'Feeling themselves as a part of a change' was a frequent expression in the collected stories, especially when the young people had participated in a project that they perceived as

innovative. For example, one young person set up a music education project for children aged 0 to 3 years old, which was the only example of its type in the area. Called *'Music in the Cradle'*, the project involved *'an age range normally excluded by the music schools'* (male, 29). In the same centre, a group of young male musicians (aged 24, 29 and 34) launched a community music school together. Their objective was not only to create a learning space for music – learning how to play musical instruments – but inspired by the Abreu method⁵ they wanted to create a community space for disadvantaged communities:

'At the beginning, we thought that having the best music teacher was the most important thing, but later we understood the importance of creating a community school.' (male, 32)

Some of these innovative projects utilised existing skills which had previously been limited to the private sphere and their leisure time. For example, a group of young mothers came together with a young fashion designer and started to produce innovative textiles utilising their traditional handicraft skills. This project involved several members of the same family, as one young person reflects:

'I think of my aunt, she was a creative housewife and now she is part of this innovative project. I think of my mother – she was just a seamstress but today she is the seamstress at [organisation B]. A lot of people meet my mother and ask for her help with their needlecraft.' (female, 25)

In some case projects were implemented without any financial resources, and these were only possible thanks to the work of volunteers. One such project on *'slow mobility'*⁶ was *'launched and implemented by a group of young people and only later obtained a partnership with the local authority'* (male, 32). Developing creativity and critical thinking was important in many projects, as one young person identifies: *'developing my own language, my own vision, by giving a poetic meaning to every [cinema] image that I create'* (male, 26).

There were a variety of outcomes identified as a result of these innovative projects. They included increased participation by the local community in projects in which they could *'have a voice, share their own existence in an isolated neighbourhood'* (male 32), as well as a realisation in the community of the value of volunteering. An artistic event developed in one youth centre and implemented in the local context had an international resonance, and so gave a meaningful global context to the event. Expressed succinctly by one young person: *'we felt less isolated from the world'* (male, 26).

Youth work processes: what generated impact and change?

A second stage of analysis was undertaken with the Italian stories, which focused on themes relating to the processes that contributed to the generation of outcomes for young people. From the perspective of a theory-based evaluation (Funnel and Rogers, 2011), the analysis of the stories allowed the authors to identify some of the mechanisms and causal links associated with the changes identified by the young people.

⁵ José Antonio Abreu Anselmi (May 7, 1939 – March 24, 2018) was a Venezuelan musician, educator and activist who is best known for his association with El Sistema. In 1975 he founded El Sistema, formally called the Foundation for the National Network of Youth and Children Orchestras of Venezuela. With El Sistema he developed an innovative youth education method in which music acts as a means to social and intellectual improvement (Majno, 2012).

⁶ Slow mobility projects encourage the use of bicycles and walking in the city, and work to improve cycle lanes and pedestrian areas.

A preliminary list of 26 initial codes was identified. Further analysis of these initial codes produced a list of 6 final codes which summarised the youth work processes associated with the change; see Table 11.7 below.

Relational space open to the community	Trust, participation, non-hierarchical relations	Holistic & experiential learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A space with a high frequency and variety of social relations • Developing relations with the local community • Promoting relations between the local community and people coming from outside • Creating a space of informal meeting for young people coming from the same neighbourhood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nurturing a sense of collective identity • Promoting trust and non-hierarchical relations • Free-of-charge activities • Autonomy from political parties • Creating opportunity for active participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective DIY experiences • Projects designed to learn from experience • Semi-leisure (spaces and activities)⁷ • Flow generating experiences (challenging, stimulating curiosity, high density) • Maieutic⁸ experiences
A space for the incubation of job-related projects	A space for the incubation of projects for change	Relation with non-formal educators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The youth centre as a driver of development for the enterprises created and operating inside it • Relating with someone who believes in your effort to turn it into a project • Flexibility in sharing a space with other group's projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using art to promote change • Offering a space open to the cultural expression of minority groups • Encouraging resistance and perseverance in a project of cultural and social change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relating with 'master' and learning a lot from them • Meeting trainers who are also able to be educators • Relating with teachers that are really interested in your learning experience • Meeting charismatic teachers • Relating with natural/unaware non-formal educators • Counting on mentor in project development/implementation • Founding a positive reference point

Table 11.7 Initial and final codes associated with the processes of change

⁷Dumazedier (1967) coined the term 'semi-leisure' to refer to 'activities, which from the point of view of the individual, arise in the first place from leisure, but which represent in differing degrees the character of obligations'. In the context of a youth centre, this term can help to understand those experiences that straddle freely chosen activities and social commitments, or spanning both freely chosen informal activities that facilitate direct contact with deeper vocations and an engagement in learning activities which may have an impact on career development.

⁸The Maieutic method is often associated with the Socratic method and involves increasing knowledge through dialogue.

Figure 11.3 below shows the number of stories associated with each of the final codes. The number of occurrences is less than those final codes associated with the significant changes, but this is to be expected as young people were not asked directly what they thought had caused the changes. The most pertinent mechanism seemed to be the openness of the youth centre as a space for the local community – summarised in the final code, *‘relational space open to the local community’*. This is allied to the nurturing potential of the learning process which provides *‘holistic learning’* (linking emotional, cognitive and practical learning). The next most important feature appeared to be the *‘building of trust and non-hierarchical relations’*. The individual relationship with the youth worker appeared less frequently in the stories, although this may be implicit, remembering that young people were not asked to reflect on who had enabled them to achieve the changes. It may also be relevant that youth work does not have a specific professional or formal identity in Italy, so the youth work role is undertaken by number of different figures (experts, trainers, group facilitators, educators and community workers or social workers).

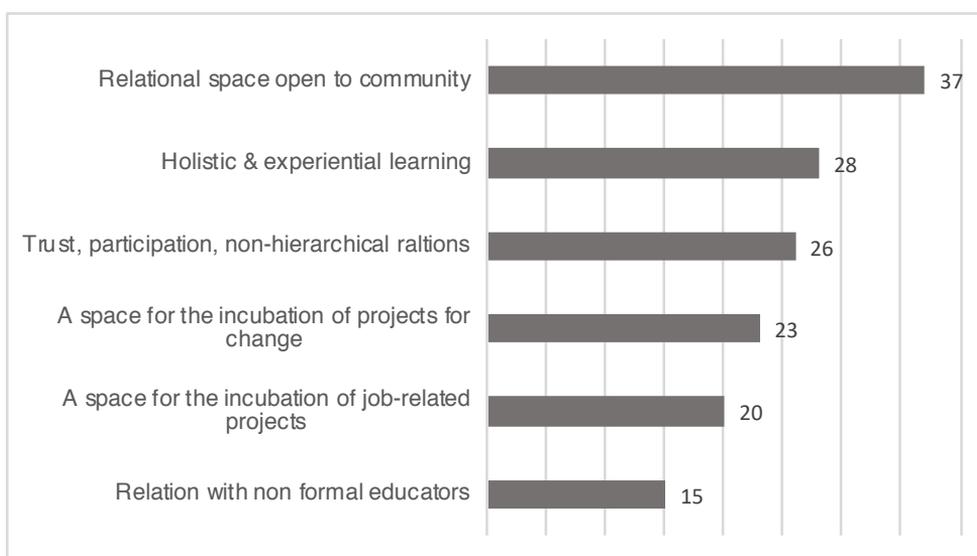


Figure 11.3 Initial and final codes associated with the processes of change

The collected change stories have begun to clarify what particular features of the youth work process have generated change outcomes in the lives of the young people. This is a complex process and many of the features interlink, but the coding process identifies some of the important features. The most prominent was the idea of the youth centre as a relational space.

Relational space open to the local community

Aspects of this relational space allude to the specific atmosphere of the youth centres – a feeling that echoes with what Smith (1988) referred to as the ‘buzz’, a sense of positive social energy as well as the feeling that new and interesting events may occur, which Smith refers to as an ‘atmosphere and sense of occasion and of things happening’ (1988: 52).

This was clear in some of the Italian stories; for example, one young person referred to the youth centre as ‘*a place full of people, dense emotions, fascinating, ready to offer a lot of experiences*’ (male, 20), and another who said: ‘*things that are impossible in other places, in the youth centre they happen ... [and] people exchange thoughts and ideas, meet and tell stories*’ (female, 25).

It is perhaps the socio-relational fluidity and dynamism of the space in the youth centre that increases the probability of generating significant ‘chance-events’ (Shanahan and Porfeli, 2007),⁹ where the *term chance* means something – either *accidental or unexpected* – which provides a positive opportunity. This is exemplified by the story of Roberto (male, 21) who explained that ‘*everything has been either fortuitous or lucky*’¹⁰ when he relayed how an expert audio engineer had decided to open a work space in the youth centre. This enabled Roberto to offer his assistance, and to realise just how much he wanted to be involved in that kind of profession.

Openness to the wider community is also an essential feature of youth centres. This is particularly relevant in the case of organisation A, which is located in a socially problematic suburb with a high rate of crime (especially involving young people). It also has a lack of services and is isolated from the rest of the city (it has only one bus and an abandoned railway station). However, the presence of the youth centre in this difficult suburb caught the imagination of the young people. For them the youth centre was a significant ‘exception’ because it operates in a neighbourhood where, as one young person makes clear, ‘*nobody ever really believed that something good was possible*’ (female, 24). In some stories, young people mentioned the intense ‘humanity’ that is hidden under the visible urban decay (which is too easily visible when you walk through the streets or when you read about gunfire, murders and arrests in the newspapers). However, for those involved in the projects this is an ‘*ideal environment*’ for a project focused on social filmmaking because it is ‘*full of contrasts*’ (male, 24). The wider community around the centre then become a ‘*forge of stories*’ that can inspire projects where young people express themselves – their emotions, feelings, thoughts and personal stories.

Trust, participation, non-hierarchical relations

A feature of the process which appears to be an important component in bringing about the personal changes reported in many of the stories is based in relational experiences with youth workers as well as peers and members of the wider community. Some of the key drivers in the process appear to be trust, participation and non-hierarchical interaction. They are features of the ‘open’ environment which enable low threshold open access – that is, free-of-charge or low cost, not a targeted intervention, open access, and operating on voluntary participation. It also has a low standardisation of roles. One young person describes how it helped her to deal with her own fear to participate; her journey was ‘*from sharing, to trust, to active involvement*’ (female, 25). Feeling that someone believes in you is also an important aspect; for example, for Leone (male, 21) the ‘*beginning of it all*’ was when he was invited to cooperate in a collective do-it-yourself project to redecorate the youth centre.

⁹The notion of the chance event refers to those type of events generated by social interactions that may have a positive effect on the trajectories of the life of an individual (Shanahan and Porfeli, 2007). The fluidity of the social environment of a youth centre focuses attention on the ability to generate unplanned events that may potentially develop into an opportunity. The studies of ‘life courses’ (Ross, 2005) that deal with ‘life events’, able to generate an impact on educational and career paths, are particularly useful from this perspective. Such events can be defined as a chance event when occurring as ‘life events that instigate change’ (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

¹⁰In the Italian language the two terms have the same root: *fortuito* (= fortuitous) and *fortunato* (= lucky).

Holistic and experiential learning

This particular relational environment seems to be able to nurture a specific kind of learning which may be best referred to as ‘holistic learning’, linking different levels of emotional, cognitive and practical experience with reflections on values, and developing sense-making (Cameron and Moss, 2011). This opportunity to learn in real-life situations is evidenced frequently in the stories, and is perhaps best described as ‘experiential’ or ‘situated learning’ (Dewey, 1938). Features of this include the following: the opportunity to experiment with something new, for example: *‘start to test, verify if an idea can become an reality’* (male, 31); to be flexible and adaptable, *‘without the obsession to standardise everything’* (female, 25); and having enough time to cultivate and develop know-how – *‘they don’t overfill the learning space, and they give you the time you need’* (female, 25). Other features include the possibility of making mistakes and being encouraged to learn from them – for example, *‘you can learn more from a failure’* (male, 26), and *‘it is precisely the possibility to fail without feeling ashamed that school doesn’t offer’* (female, 27). Finally, it also involves being able to do something that matches your real interests – for example, *‘it reflects your desires’* (male, 26) as well as stimulating curiosity – *‘[those] who come in the youth centre become curious people and always find something of interest’* (male, 25).

This kind of learning occurred, for example, where young people participated in a collective self-building project to build eco-sustainable furniture for the youth centre as well as constructing a playground in the local community. These opportunities to be a part of a fluid, informal and dynamic learning project produces, in some cases, events that are particularly meaningful for young people – what Krasnor (2008) describes as ‘high-density experiences’. This was the case for one young person who joined a film festival, saying that: *‘it really changed me into a more responsible person, it has not only been a job experience, it became part of myself’* (female, 22).

Integral to the potential of these learning experiences is the conception, planning and implementation of the projects – what is described as ‘project incubation’. This is often a cyclical process which on the one hand builds on previous learning experiences, and on the other, the new projects are a new learning in themselves. The new projects also enhance the variety, intensity and frequency of social interactions both within the youth centre and with the surrounding community. The projects incubated in the youth centre therefore activate a virtuous circle of further development of the ‘open relational space’ and provide new ‘holistic learning experiences’.

Figure 11.4 (overleaf) presents a model which incorporates the three integral features of the youth work process identified in the stories and discussed above. The model starts from the processes operating in the wider youth centre and its interaction with the community, and progressively involves individual and group experience, which also include relationships with the youth workers.

The model begins at the bottom with the ‘open relational space’ which encourages a variety of social interaction and a frequency of social events. It then develops specific holistic and experiential learning, which can in turn develop into the incubation of a number of new and diverse projects.

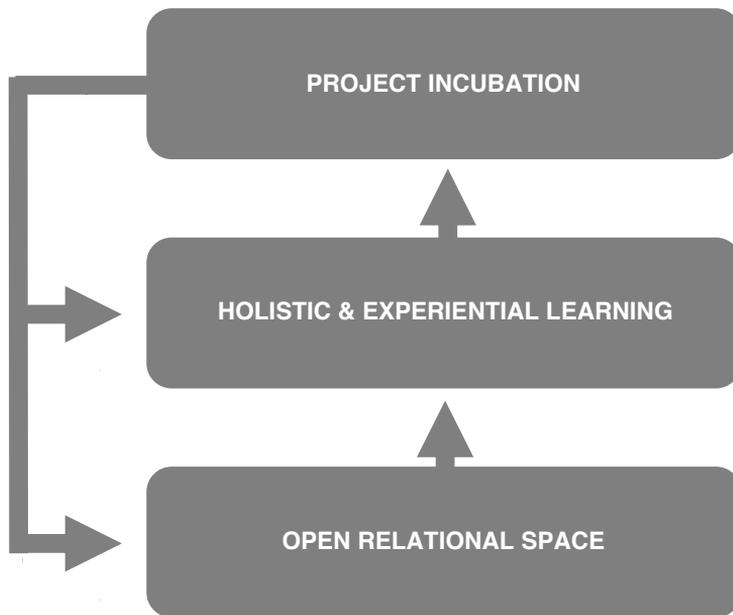


Figure 11.4 A model of youth work projects generating change

Conclusions

The key findings from the 151 stories collected in the three Italian youth centres reflect their aim to mobilise and promote the capabilities of the community and support innovation. This is exemplified in the most popular outcome identified by the respondents – ‘*improvement of job chances*’. However, this could also be further developed as the employment experiences created by the youth centre are often temporary and sometimes limited to the local context. Stronger links with the career’s advice service would therefore be useful in order to develop these opportunities further. This is particularly important given the prominence of the shadow economy in the south of Italy.

The findings also illustrate the significant role the centres play in community development in the outcomes associated with increased ‘*sense of belonging*’ and the ‘*valuing of diversity*’. The centres have clearly enabled an empowering process of change for both individuals – in promoting ‘self-determination’ – and within the community in supporting and facilitating projects which involve social and cultural change. This is particularly relevant given that in the Italian context young people are often derided as narcissistic (Cesareo, 2015).

Further analysis of the stories identified some of the mechanisms that generated these changes. Most notable appeared to be the frequency of the social interactions in the youth centre, alongside the involvement of the surrounding community characterised as the creation of an ‘*open relational space*’. This kind of relational space can nurture learning processes embedded in real-life situations, activating different levels of youth experience (intellectual, cognitive, emotional, practice etc.) and characterised as ‘holistic learning mechanisms’ (Cameron and Moss, 2011). Also crucial to the success of these projects appeared to be the conception,

planning and implementation of projects – ‘*project incubation*’. Overall, the main driver of the youth work experience seems to be the ability to generate spaces of proximity (Bottalico & Scardigno, 2007) through the building of a collective identity and a sense of belonging to the community.

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